DEPARTMENT OF STATE
FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE

Understanding Foreign People

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I. Universal Human Characteristics

A. All the various modern races of man are of one species. Despite the differences in physical appearance such as skin color, hair form, shape of the nose, stature, etc., all the modern races of the world must be assumed to have the same needs and potentialities in the absence of proof to the contrary.

B. Basic biological needs for food, sexual satisfaction, avoidance of pain, are universal.

C. Basic psychological needs of emotional response from others, security of the long term kind, and for novelty of experience also seem to be universal.

D. All human behavior can be analyzed into rational and non-rational components, but because of the large part that emotional response plays in human behavior it is more convenient to regard it as culturally standardized unreason.

E. All human groups anywhere on the face of the earth today are organized societies that meet all the basic universal biological and psycholologlcal needs.

II. Theories Devised to Explain the Great Differences in the Behavior of Different Populations

A. It has often been argued that geography and climate determine the behavior of populations. However, if all of the observed differences in human behavior were explicable solely in terms of geography and climate, there would not be differences between the Hopi and Navaho in the Southwest, nor in the behavior of Europeans one hundred years ago and Europeans today. However, geography is a very important limiting factor, in the sense that agriculture cannot develop in an arctic environment nor metallurgy in an environment devoid of metallic ores. In a sense, a people's culture also limits their exploitation of their geographic environment, since they utilize only those parts of their total environment which they have knowledge and techniques for exploiting.

B. The biological theory. Peoples differ in behavior because they inherit in the germ plasm different ways of acting from their ancestors. Were this true, the history of the United States would be different from what it is, since peoples whose ancestors have come from all parts of Europe, the Orient, and Africa today share common modes of behavior with one another as Americans, which differs from the behavior of descendants of the same ancestors who did not emigrate.

C. The economic theory. The abstraction of the "economic man" is of very limited and doubtful utility at best. All of the other social and psychological factors that condition man's behavior even in what are usually regarded as purely "economic" activities are ignored. It assumes a single set of motivations, where we are actually dealing with a complex. See lecture outline on Obtaining Personnel Cooperation, II.

D. The political theory. Political man, like economic man, is an abstraction of convenience, and useful only to the extent that one can successfully isolate certain segments of behavior from the total context of the daily life of organized human groups.

E. Contemporary social scientists avoid any single factor analysis and rather try to account for all of these factors in describing and analyzing human behavior.

III. The Concept of Culture

A. The term culture is used by social scientists to refer to the totality of the behavior of any particular group of people, whether they be tribes, villages, or nation states. It is equivalent to the ordinary meaning of civilization in its broadest sense, or what is meant by a way of life.

B. Technically, culture is defined as the configuration of learned behavior and results of behavior whose component elements are shared and transmitted by members of a particular society.

C. The great problem in international relations and in everyday dealing with foreign people is that most of us tend to identify our traditional ways of meeting problems, of organizing life, and of reacting to situations as "human nature," whereas all of it is learned. Other peoples have developed different solutions to the same universal problems, and consequently, have different human natures.

D. Every culture is ethnocentric. This term refers to the fact that each people tends to regard its own particular culture as either the best or the only proper solution, and to think of all others as either quaint, queer, or "cussed."

E. Culture is not only a way of life that is emotionally adhered to and conformed to, but is also a set of solutions to the universal problems of life.

F. The various aspects of culture that can be analyzed and described - economic, technological, political, social and psychological - are all delicately interlinked. There are not only the overt behavior which can be observed directly, but also attitudes, feelings and other components that are often referred to as the sentiments. Sentiments of any culture also have structure and organization, and can be determined by inferences from observed behavior.

G. Every culture embodies certain unstated assumptions or hypotheses that vary tremendously in different societies. All Americans assume that every chain of action is directed toward a goal. To those who do not share this assumption, but rather see life as a series of activities that are satisfying by themselves, our behavior is meaningless and quixotic.

H. A culture is also a series of expectancies. Not only do we learn prescribed ways to behave toward others in terms of their sex, age and status, but we also learn what we may expect from them in return. Extremely important in evaluating morale.

I. Every culture embodies a social myth, which is a set of rationalizations and beliefs that give coherence and meaning to the activities of the society.

J. Cultures tend toward integration. Certain dominant ways of organizing activities or of phrasing issues characterize all the activities of the society, and color the people's approach to economic, political and social activities alike. As a corollary, changes that occur in one aspect of any culture will produce concomitant changes in other aspects, or there will be serious social disorganization.

K. No culture is ever completely static. The rate of change may be so slow as to produce apparent stability, or relatively rapid, as has been the case with Western Europe and the United States during the last one hundred and fifty years.

L. Every culture is selective. No great civilization with all its diversity embodies in its institutions all of the possible ways of defining situations, and meeting problems. Consequently, as the Foreign Service officer moves from post to post and country to country, he will always be discovering new "normals" and new standards.

M. Most of the sentiment structure characteristic of any given culture never rises to the consciousness of individuals, and is assumed as a universal. Usually, it cannot even be verbalized.

N. There is no psychological scale against which to evaluate the different cultures of the world. Each culture may be satisfactory to the members of the society which embodies its traditions. Consequently, problems must be seen from the point of view of the individual of the other nation, as well as in terms of American assumptions and American solutions. It may well be that different courses of action from those we are accustomed to may be reconciled with those we traditionally follow.

IV. The Human Personality

A. Every human being is born into a society that is a going concern, and he is, from the moment of birth, conditioned (taught) to behave in accordance with the standards of that society.

B. The biological nature of the human infant is plastic. Consequently, each child learns in the process of growing up to conform to the standards of his group in terms of his age, sex and status.

C. Habits on the individual level correspond to customs on the social level, and to the extent that individuals have shared similar early experiences, they will manifest similar personality patterns.

D. Habits and habit systems in each individual are established by differential reward and punishment, usually meted out by parents.

E. To the extent that patterns of child rearing and other experiences are different from culture to culture, there will be corresponding differences in their adult character structures.

F. Habits established early in the individual's life influence all subsequent learning. Patterns of deference to those of superior status, or obediance to those in authority established in relationship to parents, brothers, and sisters, will tend to be transferred to other members of the society in terms of their superordinate or subordinate status.

G. Culture affects the personality of the individual in two distinct ways: (1) through the culturally patterned behavior of individuals toward the child, and (2) through his observation of and instruction in the modes of behavior established in his society.

H. Since all social behavior including the policies of great nations is ultimately the behavior of human beings - sometimes millions of them - in the situations in which they are placed, the understanding of individual motivation in different cultural milieu is fundamental.

I. Similar things and similar motives have different meanings in the context of different cultures. These meanings become intelligible in the light of cultural symbols, sometimes referred to as national characteristics.

V. Some Common American Assumptions, Characteristic of Contemporary American Culture Patterns

A. Utility. Americans are a practical people, and they characteristically tend to judge a policy or a plan by the practical results that will be achieved and regard this as perfectly natural. But acts which are practical and useful to us may well seem arbitrary and unreasonable to peoples who have not been shaped by our cultural tradition. The utility of behavior is a question that may well never occur to other people.

B. Egalitarianism. The idea of the equality of men is one of the most firmly grounded and longest established traditions of the American people. It is not only explicitly stated in our most treasured historic documents, but it pervades all aspects of daily life. The tendency quickly to get on a first name basis in both business and social life, the informality of social life, and the discomfort that both officers and enlisted men felt in the hierarchy of the Army and Navy during the last war are all evidences of this basic assumption.

C. Competition. Americans are firmly convinced that all achievement is best furthered by competition. It is assumed to be the essential ingredient in all of our national growth - "what has made this country great," and is the basis of the "free enterprise system." We actually compete from the cradle to the grave - within the family, in school, on the playground, in business, social life (keeping up with the Joneses, but preferably getting ahead of them) and in government. Psychological tests show that most Americans do their best work in a competitive situation. But the Japanese, who avoid competition, where all life as arranged on a hierarchical basis so that there can be no competition, fall off in performance when placed in a competitive situation. This assumption blinds most Americans to the needless waste and duplication that occurs in American organizations and the effects it has had in the exploitation of the country's natural resources.

D. The Distrust of Authority. This fundamental American attitude is institutionalized politically in our government of "checks and balances," which is correlated with the assumption that all government is a necessary evil and its activities should be kept to a minimum. However, its implications are much more far reaching than that since children resent the authority of parents, pupils of teachers workers of bosses, and citizens of government. An ordinary policeman - the prime symbol of properly constituted authority - is usually felt by the ordinary citizen to be an individual "who is looking for a chance to push me around." Americans do not identify with those individuals who hold position of authority and power in our social organizations. Consequently, the words "politician," "bureaucrat," "boss," etc. all have unfavorable connotations when spoken by an American that they do not necessarily have when used by foreigners.

E. Status Must be Validated in Each Generation. Americans with their assumption that all men are equal, and that each man competes to achieve success in each and every walk of life, have no room in their system for hereditary status. In many countries both in Europe and the Orient one's position is determined for life at birth, whether one chooses to do anything about it or not. But in the United States, it does not matter whether one is named Lodge, Saltonstall, Roosevelt, Ford or Rockefeller, he is entitled to relatively little recognition or prestige by that fact alone. It is what he has achieved in his own lifetime that counts. Consequently, the term "idle rich" when used by an American contains opprobrium for the idle, but not for the rich.

F. All of the five indices that have been mentioned as American assumptions are interrelated in both American life and in the American social myth, with many other factors that contribute to the American culture pattern.

VI. The Analysis of a Foreign Culture

A. Since the behavior of the peoples of most countries have not yet been systematically analyzed in the manner indicated here, what can one do when living in a foreign country?

B. One can become consciously aware of the factors that make us behave as Americans. Since these factors are relative (and there are no absolutes) one can be aware that our economics, our politics, and our social system represent but one of many ways of organizing life.

C. Language. The value of speaking the language of the country in which one is stationed is self evident. But more is involved than linguistic fluency. Because of the far reaching effects which the structure of a language has in imposing its forms and categories upon those speaking it, they are never aware of how language selects any given people's responses to the world in which they live. As soon as one deals with a language outside of the Indo-European family, he will find that each language represents an analysis of human experience, but that no two analyze it from the same point of view. See lecture outline Language and Culture.

D. The Class Structure. Because of the rapidity of social movement in the United States, and the goal of individual upward mobility, Americans find it difficult to understand the operation of societies that are more rigidly stratified.

1. The British, for example, have a relatively rigid class system operating with a political democracy. With the absence of our social mobility there is also an absence of the tension and frustration so characteristic of modern American life. With social position determined at birth, economic activities and relations with other members of society are also determined. An extreme

case such as is found in the caste system of India is difficult for us to understand, but it has many advantages from the Indian's point of view. At birth, one is completely placed in the social organization as far as work, marriage, religion and social life is concerned. Not only is there little possibility to change one's status, but there is no desire to do so, and when change occurs it affects the status of the whole caste, not the individual.

2. There is also a widespread area in which a two-class system prevails. In Latin America, there is the wealthy, landowning, cosmopolitan aristocracy and the vast majority of the people who constitute an agricultural peasantry. The same kind of system is characteristic of the countries of Southeast Asia, except that there it grew up locally, and in Latin America it was imported. New classes, like the growth of an urban industrial group or changes in the traditional arrangements between the two classes are symptoms of far-reaching change. It is necessary to see the interrelationship between the two groups to determine how changes are going to affect the society as a whole.

3. In analyzing a society with clearly marked social classes, it is essential to find out what behavior the members of different classes share, as well as the behavior that differentiates them. Their complementary functions are as important as are their conflicting ones. Frequently, attitudes toward property and toward authority are the same in all classes as in Holland or Rumania, but different from country to country.

E. The Prestige System. In all societies there are differential statuses, and usually symbols that indicate status. What is it that gives a man power and importance? Prestige is the power and importance one enjoys as a result of conforming to the standards of the society.

1. Age-grade systems. In some societies one's prestige is taken care of automatically by a series of statuses correlated with one's age. The individual and others of his same age group advance from position to position assuming different responsibilities and powers at different ages. Thus one is first an apprentice, a warrior, a married man, and finally an elder counselor.

2. Wealth. Wealth may or may not give its possessor prestige and power. With us and the British it does. In many societies mere possession of wealth is of no importance. It must be lavishly distributed, or it must be ostentatiously displayed.

3. Military. Is there a regular class from which military figures are drawn? Are men in uniform permitted to exercise power, and do they enjoy the respect of the people? In Japan and Germany the soldier had great prestige, whereas in Old China soldiers were regarded with contempt.

4. Achieved and Ascribed Prestige. In some countries positions of importance go automatically with one's status which is determined at birth. In others one has to win the position, as is usually the case in the United States.

F. The Family. This unit, which is found in every society in the world, is important because it represents a social microcosm of the society as a whole, and because so much of the important conditioning of the individual which makes him a Frenchman, an Arab, a Hindu or an American takes place within it.

1. Is the father an authoritative or an indulgent figure? Is he the model for the son's behavior? Do sons identify with the father?

2. What is the mother's role? What is her status within the family group? Does she handle the household accounts and property? What are her prerogatives?

3. What is the size of the family group? Is it a large extended family of thirty or forty people in three generations living as one household, or is it a small biological family of father, mother and children?

4. How are sons treated? How are daughters treated? What distinctions are made on the basis of sex? What distinctions are made on the basis of relative age among the children?

5. How are children rewarded and punished? What behavior is insisted upon? What behavior is tabooed? Is precocity encouraged as with Americans, or is it a factor of no concern to the parent?

6. What is the child's first experience with property? Is he given things outright with freedom to dispose of them in his own way? Is he taught to distinguish between family property and individual property?

7. Is the training of the child consistent? Does he have to learn to be docile in one situation and aggressive in another? How does his training equip him for his roles in adult society?

VII. Conclusion

With a few suggestions of this kind as to what to look for when living with any foreign people, it is possible to make your experience rich and rewarding, and to transmit to others a set of systematic observations, and not a set of useless stereotypes. Every applicant for a visa, as well as opposite numbers in the Foreign Office, becomes an individual shaped by his experience in a specific culture, and from the regularities in the behavior of many individuals it is possible to distinguish between the cultural patterns of the society and the idiosyncratic behavior of the individual.

Suggested Readings

Reeves, Emery - The Anatomy of Peace.
Chapter I states the problem involved in the nationalistic ethnocentric viewpoint of the peoples of Europe.

Benedict, Ruth - Patterns of Culture.
An early statement of the relativity of cultures and the relationship between culture and personality in three different societies.

Linton, Ralph - The Cultural Background of Personality.
A concise statement of the nature of culture and its relationship to personality formation in terms of social roles, status and other factors.

Thomas, W. I. - Primitive Behavior.
Material assembled from publications up to 1937.

Leighton, Alexander - The Governing of Men.
A study of the administration of a War Relocation Center. Part II, "Principles and Recommendations," is especially valuable.

Kardiner, A. and Associates - Psychological Frontiers of Society.
Study of the relationship of culture and personality in three societies, with theoretical postulates and conclusions by a psychologist.

Benedict, Ruth - The Chrysanthemum and The Sword.
An analysis of the cultural patterns of Japan and how they are learned anew in each generation.

Kluckhohn, Clyde - Mirror for Man.
An account or the relationship of anthropology to contemporary problems.

Kluckhohn, Clyde and Murray, H.A. - Personality in Nature, Society, and Culture.
A collection of annotated and edited articles by psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists in the field of personality in culture.

Linton, Ralph - The Rest of the World.
A collection of articles on the major areas of the world outside the orbit of Western European civilization, with two essays on population and natural resources.

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May 24, 1949